

Message Text

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ACTION SS-25

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R 181424Z AUG 76
FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
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INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN
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EXDIS

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PFOR, SY, SA, EG, LE
SUBJECT: ASAD AND SADAT

REF: (A) JIDDA 5561 (B) CAIRO 10937

1. SUMMARY: WE FIND PERSUASIVE THE REPORTED SAUDI VIEW ABOUT ASAD'S LEADERSHIP AND THE DIFFEREING STAKES HE AND SADAT HAVE IN LEBANESE CRISIS. ASAD IS RUNNING THE BAATH AND NOT VICE-VERSA, PARTICULARLY IN FIELD OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND INTER-ARAB RELATIONS. CAIRO'S ANTI-ASAD PROPAGANDA IS HAVING SOME EFFECT AND WILL ENCOURAGE ANTI-REGIME ELEMENTS IN SYRIA. END SUMMARY.

2. WE STRUCK BY CONTRAST IN SAUDIS' NUANCED VIEWS OF SYRIAN POLITICAL SCENE AND PRESIDENT SADAT'S RATHER STARK VIEW OF ASAD'S DOMESTIC POLITICA RELATIONSHIPS AND FUTURE OF ASAD REGIME (REFTELS). THIS DIFFERENCE MAY BE PARTIALLY EXPLICABLE IN TERMS OF THE SAUDIS BETTER CURRENT SOURCES OF INTELLGIENCE ON SYRIA. LARGE NUMBER OF SYRIANS RESIDENT IN SAUDI ARABIA CONSTITUTES

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SIGNIFICANT GROUP WHICH FUNCTIONS AS BUSINESSMEN AND

POLITICAL AND TECHNICAL ADVISORS TO SARG. ACCORDING TO DAMASCUS SOURCE WHO FOLLOWS SYRO-SAUDI RELATIONSHIP CLOSELY, AUDIS RECEIVE ADVICE BOTH FROM SYRIANS FAVORABLY DISPOSED TO SURVIVAL OF CURRENT DAMASCUS REGIME AND FROM THOSE WHO CAUTION RIYADH AGAINST ALIGNING ITSELF TOO CLOSELY WITH ASAD. WHILE FORMER APPEAR PRESENTLY HAVE EAR OF HOME OF SAUD, VIEWS OF LATTER NONETHELESS REGISTER AND SEEM TO BE PROVIDING SAR WITH BALANCED PICTURE OF COMPLEXITIES INHERENT IN SYRIAN POLITICS. RELATIVELY GREATER SAUDI OBJECTIVITY ON SYRIA OF COURSE AIDED BY ABSENCE OF ANY PROPAGANDA ATTACKS AGAINST KINGDOM SUCH AS THOSE FOR WHICH CAIRO HAS BEEN CONSTANT TARGET SINCE SINGING OF SINAI II. (INCIDENTALLY, ALTHOUGH SYRIAN VOCAL OPPOSITION TO SINAI ACCORD HAS BEEN STINGING, WE DOUBT SARG EVER BELIEVED IT COULD GET ACCORD OVERTURNED.)

3. SADAT, ON OTHER HAND, APPEARS AS OBSESSED WITH HIS SYRIAN CRITICS AS ASAD IS WITH HIS PALESTINIAN AND LEBANESE OPPONENTS.

EGYPTIAN PROPAGANDA ATTACKS HAVE MOUNTED IN INTENSITY AND OUR IMPRESSION IS THAT THESE ATTACKS HAVE HAD SOME EFFECT WITHIN SYRIA. ACCUSATIONS THAT ASAD RULING OVER "ALAWITE BAATHIST" REGIME IS AN UNCOMFORTABLY ACCURATE DESCRIPTION OF SYRIA'S MILITARY/NATIONAL SECURITY APPARATUS DOMINATED BY ALAWITES. SYRIANS WHO READILY AGREE WITH THESE CHARGES, HOWEVER, RESENT AS THEY DID BACK IN NASSER'S TIME SADAT'S IMPLICATION THAT "MOTHER EGYPT" KNOWS WHAT IS BEST FOR HER ARAB CHILDREN. DAMASCUS, WHOSE PRETENTIONS FOR ARAB LEADERSHIP ROLE SOARED UNREALISTICALLY AFTER SINAI AGREEMENT, HAS SEEMINGLY ACCEPTED A SMALL AND PERHAPS MORE REALISTIC GOAL FOR ITSELF: HEGEMONY OVER JORDAN, LEBANON, THE PLO AND THROUGH THE LATTER A FUTURE WEST BANK/GAZA STATE. BUT EVEN IN THIS REDUCED ROLE, SYRIA STILL CONSIDERS ITSELF "THE BEATING HEART OF ARABISM." IT FIERCELY REJECTS ANY SUGGESTION THAT ITS RECENT ACTIONS IN LEBANON HAVE IN ANY WAY TARNISHED ITS RECORD OF UNREMITTING SACRIFICE FOR PALESTINIAN CAUSE AND OF A CLAIM TO "MORAL AND PRINCIPLED STANDS" ON BEHALF OF ARAB

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UNITY.

4. WE NOTE THAT SADAT NO LONGER DISTTINGUISES BETWEEN ASAD AND BAATH PARTY AND THAT HE CONSIDERS PRESIDENT UNDER SPELL OF BAATH EXTRM WE BELIEVE SADAT ONLY HALF RIGHT IN THIS ANALYSIS. ASAD BY ALL EVIDENCE RUNS THE BAATH PARTY, NOT VICE VERSA. EVEN SYRIANS HARSHLY CRITICAL BOTH OF THE PARTY AND THE PRESENT REGIME

ACKNOWLEDGE THAT ASAD BOSSES THE PARTY,
"CONSULTING" ONLY WHEN NECESSARY TO SECURE A VEIL OF
LEGITIMACY FOR HIS DECISIONS. THIS IS PARTICULARLY THE
CASE IN THE FIELD OF FOREIGN POLICY AND INTER-ARAB
RELATIONS. IN LEBANON ASAD HAS ADOPTED COURSE OF
ACTION IN DEFIANCE OF MANY PARTY MEMBERS--PERHAPS
EVEN A MAJORITY OF BAATHISTS -- WHO ARE DEEPLY
TROUBLED BY SYRIAN INVOLVEMENT IN THE MESS THAT IS
LEBANON. ASAD AND SADAT IN ANY EVENT CLEARLY DIFFER
IN THEIR VIEW OF WHO HAS THE BETTER RIGHT TO CLAIM A VITAL
INTEREST IN A "SUCCESSFUL OUTCOME" IN LEBANON.

5. EMBASSY CAIRO'S VIEW THAT SADAT HAS "WRITTEN OFF
ASAD" HAS SERIOUS IMPLICATIONS, ESPECIALLY SINCE
EGYPTIANS ARE NOT RELUCTANT TO COMMUNICATE THIS
ATTITUDE THROUGH THEIR PUBLIC MEDIA. IT SEEMS A SHORT
STEP FROM WRITING OFF ASAD TO PROMOTING
POTENTIAL SUCCESSORS. MOST SYRIANS HAVE LONG
RECOGNIZED THAT PRESENT IRAQI LEADERSHIP IS COMMITTED
TO THIS REGIME'S DOWNFALL. ONE LEADING DISSIDENT HAS
TOLD US THAT REGIME'S OPPONENTS WILL NOT MOVE WITHOUT
ASSURED SUPPORT FROM IRAQ AND/OR EGYPT. HE HINTED
THAT INITIAL CONTACTS WITH BOTH CAPITALS HAVE ALREADY
TAKEN PLACE, BUT WOULD NOT GO INTO SPECIFICS. HE
REMARKED PRIOR TO RECENT EXCHANGE OF ACCUSATIONS
(CAIRO 10844, DAMASCUS 5388) THAT EGYPTIAN ACTIONS
WERE WOUNDING DAMASCUS, BUT THAT EGYPTIAN LEADERSHIP
SEEMED UNCERTAIN WHETHER TO STEP-UP ITS ANTI-SARG
ACTIVITIES. HE DESCRIBED CAIRO'S
INDECISION AS PROLONGING "DEATH AGONY OF ASAD
REGIME." WHILE THIS INDIVIDUAL'S COMMENTS CONTAIN HEALTHY
MEASURE OF WISHFUL THINKING, IT IS TRUE ASAD'S
OPPONENTS CAREFULLY GAUGE THE DIMENSIONS OF THE
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SYRO-EGYPTIAN DISPUTE AND MEASURE THE INTENSITY OF
SIGNALS THAT CAIRO MIGHT ACTIVELY ENCOURAGE CHANGE
IN SYRIAN LEADERSHIP. IN VIEW OF SADAT'S CHARACTER
TRAITS MENTIONED REF B AND SARG'S UNDISPUTED SUCCESS
IN ANGERING GOE, WE AGREE THAT SAUDIS CONFRONT
UPHILL STRUGGLE IF THEY HOPE TO BRING ASAD AND
SADAT TOGETHER. WE HOPE SAUDIS WILL KEEP TRYING.
MURPHY

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